

MTNHP Partners Committee

Summary of November 12, 2008 Meeting

Attending: 18 guests representing 11 Partner agencies and organizations (4 state and 4 federal agencies & 2 non-profits); 7 MTNHP staff and 3 representatives of the Montana State Library.

Presentations and meeting handouts are available on the MTNHP website at:
http://nhp.nris.state.mt.us/Docs/Partners/November_2008.asp

Programmatic Updates

Director Sue Crispin gave an overview of results from the recent User Survey. The survey response was excellent with 336 respondents, representing an incredible response rate of over 40% to emailed invitations! Seventy percent of responses came from state and federal agencies, and 21% from the private sector (including individuals). The largest groups of responses came from US Forest Service (76), MT-FWP (58) and BLM (30). Highlights included:

- Users reported high levels of satisfaction with MTNHP products & services across the board. Staff Expertise and Responsiveness got especially high ratings; the most room for improvement was in Completeness of Information.
- Most respondents reported “Great Benefit” from MTNHP services in improving efficiency, accuracy, decision-making, resource-management and products/services to their customers. Many private sector respondents also reported “Great Benefit” in cost-savings.
- Species of Concern lists, reports and searches were among the most highly valued products. Ecological and Aquatic information were among the least used, presumably because they are so incomplete (and currently our highest priorities for statewide development).
- Trends indicate increasing use of 38% of respondents, with less than 10% reporting decreased use (most due to job changes or relocation out of state).
- Most web services, including Tracker, were reported “Easy to Use” or “OK with Effort” by most respondents. “Submit an Observation” was judged “Too Difficult” by only 4% of respondents, but another 53% don’t use the function. Help Files also showed low usage.
- Highest priorities for new products included land cover and wetland/riparian maps, species & ecosystem management information, species/habitat monitoring, and predictive distribution maps.

To further increase usage of web resources, Partners urged continued training for agency staff. They also cautioned against focusing more effort on common species (requested by some users), lest it pull resources away from high priority species that still need better documentation. Ecosystem information was noted as the most efficient way to address commoner species, at least from a management perspective. Overall, the Survey was a big success, netting great comments, suggestions and ideas. MTNHP staff also appreciated the many compliments and words of encouragement!

Land Cover mapping

Senior Ecologist Linda Vance gave an update on development of a new statewide land cover layer using federal ReGap products. In addition to continued delays by the USGS in completing coverage for Montana, we are finding that some of the Ecological System types need to be clarified or re-assessed for Montana and that some systems have extensive mapping errors. NHP ecologists and image analysts will be working over the winter to correct many of these problems, and Linda asked Partners for help identifying field staff with knowledge of local vegetation types, especially in eastern Montana. She also invited input on map design and on how people want to use the maps, to aid in designing products. Linda also provided a brief update on wetland mapping efforts and asked Partners for help identifying priority areas in the state where wetland/riparian maps need to be completed.

Statewide Weed Mapping - Needs Assessment Update

At the urging of folks in the weed community, NHP convened a group of 20 weed and weed information experts from across the state last May, just following the last Partners meeting. That group called for a Feasibility Study to evaluate creation of a statewide weed mapping layer, including clarifying objectives, technical requirements & costs. Linda noted that funding is still being pulled together to support the assessment, working with the Dept. of Agriculture and the Montana Weed Control Association. Steve Shelly suggested that a 1-page description of the proposed project would help NHP Partners and potential funders understand and evaluate it. Lynda Saul suggested working with watershed groups through the Watershed Coordination Council, as many got their start in weed control, and have been successful at raising funds in that area.

Species of Concern Report – Proposed Changes

Scott Mincemoyer described an idea to move from producing static Species of Concern reports that are updated every couple years, to a dynamic on-line report that is generated using current species ranks and status. This would address the problem that printed (or pdf) SOC reports becoming out-of-date whenever state or global ranks are updated, which can happen anytime new information becomes available or when we receive updated global ranks from NatureServe. This results in the printed reports being inconsistent with information on the NHP website – a potentially serious problem.

Partners voiced strong support for moving to a dynamic reporting process that would provide the most current status data. Discussion focused on how to address some challenges posed by continuous updating of status ranks and reports, including training/education and having a mechanism to inform interested/expert persons about proposed changes (e.g., by email) and providing an opportunity to respond with relevant information. Other suggestions included the ability to customize reports by agency, and including the history of species' status changes.

Predicted Habitat/Distribution Modeling – Update/Input

Senior Zoologist Bryce Maxell showed some of the latest modeling results and asked for input on different options for interpreting and displaying outputs. Partners favored maps that show habitat suitability classes, which involve more effort to produce but are easier to understand and use (see attached example). Products of the modeling effort will also include lists of species predicted to occur within a variety of administrative boundaries, as well as combined model outputs for multiple species to indicate overall species diversity likely to be supported (see examples under Partner Committee Meeting Materials). Bryce also asked for feedback on how people would like to use the models.

Models have been completed for amphibians, reptiles, bats, grassland birds, and Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. Because NHP is combining forces with FWP on modeling a number of vertebrate species for their crucial areas assessment, models for all vertebrates will be completed by the late spring of 2009. Species lists by various administrative boundaries should be available then as well. In the meantime, if anyone is interested in receiving model output, they can contact Bryce at bmaxell@mt.gov.

Zoological Survey Priorities – Discussion

Bryce reviewed current projects and future priorities from a statewide perspective, including surveys of terrestrial mollusks in eastern Montana (including BLM lands), bat roosting habitat surveys, and expanding the scope of grassland bird surveys and developing a statewide approach. There was discussion about also looking at species most likely to be affected by climate change, such as black swifts, harlequin ducks and butterflies in alpine habitats. Another suggestion was to look at western forest species that could be strongly impacted by increases in red & dead, such as cassin's finch. Bryce noted in addition that a new round of updates to the Field Guide should also be a high priority.

Information Needs for Sagebrush Management

Sagebrush mapping is the biggest identified need, and partners are hoping that ReGap does a better job of identifying sagebrush habitat than the Gap maps did. Linda indicated that there will still be significant accuracy limitations, and noted that the Heritage Program's Spatial Analysis Lab (at UM) has been doing some work for BLM to test several types of imagery (NAIP, SPOT, Quickbird) for improved sage mapping. Since this involved purchasing an imagery scene for the Powder River Basin, there will be an opportunity to extend this mapping into Montana for reduced cost. Cathy Maynard noted another project that was getting good results at a modest cost, and also suggested developing protocols and training to encourage the collection of training data (funding from USGS for NHP to conduct training in the national vegetation classification will address that). Another SAL project is mapping cheatgrass & Japanese brome in sagebrush habitats. Partners will get email notices when project reports are available.

Wrap-up

Sue thanked everyone who attended and Jennie Stapp for chairing the meeting. The next meeting of the NHP Partners Committee will be held in March or early April of 2009.